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ABSTRACT

Dreams can be used to draw students into an authentic expression of their creativity and to give them some validation for what they are as persons. A "dream seminar" in a writing course could have students read and discuss Whitman's "Leaves of Grass"; log, report, and discuss their dreams during the course; and explore other forms of expressive writing. The dreams would serve as a personal and cultural touchstone for the imaginative and the authentic. The public sharing of these private experiences reveals the commonality of those experiences while respecting the authenticity of the individual. There are four functions of the dream seminar: (1) it is a self-governed and self-driven class; (2) it taps creativity directly in two supportive ways, psychological and rhetorical; (3) it yokes together the rhetorical polarity of public versus private writing; and (4) it provides student writing with validation and authenticity. Some possible problems with the dream seminar include avoidence behavior among the students, a tendency on the part of the students to consider the course "silly," and the responsiblity of the teacher to balance the self-growth aspects with academic evaluations. Used properly, a dream seminar can produce a continual laboratory for examination of rhetorical responsibility and personal interaction within the context of creativity and writing that engages in the evaluation of literary culture. (HOD)

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# DREAMS: Reading the Songs of the Self

by C. W. Spinks

Undoubtedly there are those who wonder what do dreams have to with writing--much less the teaching of writing? Or those who ask how does one "read" songs of the self in such a way that they seem to have some connection with dreams or dreaming? Or those who ponder what dreams and writing (assuming they can be connected) have to do with roles and reponsibilities for readers? Not suprisingly, I think I can make a case that will answer these questions, for I teach a course which tries to weave all of these elements together, and it has proven to be a most productive and interesting class. It is called "Dreams: The Songs of the Self," and it seeks to draw students into an authentic expression of their creativity and to give them some validation for what they are as persons through the format of the DREAM SEMINAR.

Before attempting to answer those questions I just suggested, let me explain first exactly what it is that I do in the classroom and what I expect it to do in the teaching of writing. First, the idea that I am using is stolen one--with permission from Richard M. Jones at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington from his book THE DREAM POET, and if what I say here suggests

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possibilities to you, you should take a look at Jones. His suggestions, caveats, and encouragements are of immense help. What I have done is simply to develope my own version of someone else's idea, but Jones's idea is such a powerful one that it is immensely productive and adaptable to both personal styles and different academic situations. What one does is to build a class around an selected and relevant academic topic and the dreams of the class members and then to use the class as a forum for discussion and writing about the inter-relationhips that are discovered. Jones and his colleagues at Evergreen have done courses based on Freud, Chaucer, and others. My own (and as I have since discovered not so original) adaptation is to center such a dream seminar in a writing course whose academic focus was the poetry of Walt Whitman. My students read and discuss Whitman's LEAVES OF GRASS; they log, report, and discuss their dreams during the course; and they are required to explore other forms of expressive writing as well. To some extent, the bent of this particular class is toward creative writing, but that is only partly the consequence of the structure. This first group of students just happened to be (unless information circulating about the course worked as pre-selection device) interested in creative writing. But regardless of the type of writing,

these students do a huge amount of it: six major, graded (for average) pieces, a daily dreamlog with reflections and responses, and a two hour writing assignment each week dittoed and circulated for the class. They can--and often do--write other things in addition: letters, responses, critiques, etc--most of which are generated by them with only gentle encourgement from me.

The course is set up on the tri-partite basis. At the first meeting of the week, we discuss the readings or whatever dreams may be brought to class--both of these may take a little prompting early in the semester. Then between the first and second meetings of the week, the students are asked to write two hours in response to the readings, the dreams, or the discussions (and related topics). At the second meeting, the "writings" are read to the class and discussed. And finally the two-hour writing assigment is dittoed and circulated the next week, for filing and further written responses which can be focused and continued in some systematic way or be allowed to find their own direction. There are also a series of what I call "Self-primer" writing assignments on dreams, fantasy, narrative, etc for those who seem to be dry during a particular week; so far these have been needed for only about two or three weeks, and then the selves of the

students take over, and the teacher's task becomes one of encouraging selection and editing rather than generation. This last semester a class of 14 students used nearly three hundred ditto masters, consumed nearly 10 reams of memograph paper, and produced 14 notebooks each weighting about two and one half pounds.

So as you can see, this is particulary a writing course rather than just a dream discussion group. The thrust of my assumption, the intent of my "shared" design, the goal of my lecturettes and facilitation is to get the students writing and responding to writing, and as Jones points out the dream seminar is ideal for exactly that. Dreams participate in individual creativity and are usually fascinating; they are centered in individual significances yet seem to have a recognizable familiarity, they are common to all individuals while keeping a unique quality; and they are a personal and cultural touchstone for the imaginative and the authentic. Let me underscore that last one--they are a personal AND cultural touchstone for the imaginative AND the authentic. Threre is no need here to deveope a defense of dreams; there are more than enough pyschologists, artists, and others to testify about the import of dreams that I will not argue for the validity of dreams for the creativity process. But I do want to argue,

like Jones, that dreams are most useable in an academic context, and that is where the creativity (in a context of authenticity) argument is most important.

A dream seminar is more than just a touchy-feely fun and games approach to writing. It validates and authenticates writing and creativity in an academic context. It is the individual's touching the touchstone of his or her own creativity--in living, nightly color; it is the individual sensing the pattern of his or her own significances; it is the individual comprehending the semiotics of his/her own experience; and finally it is the individual doing all of these in a public fashion, for the public sharing of these private experiences reveal the commonality of those experiences, the significances, and the culture while respecting the authenticity of the individual. The dream seminar becomes a vehicle for both validation of personal subjectivtiy and the authentication of cultural objectivity. It produces a continual laboratory for examination of rhetorical responsibility and personal interaction within the context of creativity and writing that engages in that most academic of activities--the evaluation of literary culture.

There are four major dimensions to the function of a

dream seminar that are of particular interest to a teacher of writing. One, it really is a self-governed and self-driven class. Motivating is uncessary; the dreams (within the context of the reading and writing) soon pull the class in a self-chosen direction which is of particular interest to the students because it is from them, for them, and about them. The quality of writing and the quality of response become uniquely responsible, for the students have to learn to be both tough and tender, fair and critical, open and calculating because they instinctively know that what is being displayed and reacted to is very much theirs and their own. Self-discovery and self-expression becomes their own govenors; they modulate the responses, they facilitate the explorations, and they necessitate concern for the best expression possible. So as one does not need to motivate, one does not need to correct. One directs and facilitates what the student or the class would do, and consequently intensifies the authenticity and validation processes.

A second dimension to the dream seminar is that it taps the creative directly in two different and mutually supportative ways--one psychological, the other rhetorical. Psychologically, as Jones points out, the process of dreaming is the process of creating narratives which

utilize all the devices narratives will need (setting, viewpoint, sequence, character, symbol, image, etc). The dream is not only a creation itself, it also suggests and exemplifies all the devices of creativity one might use. The dream orientation is obviously well suited for creative writing situations, but it also is useful for non-creative writing situations, which brings me to the rhetorical side of creativity. The students are brought face to face with a number of rhetorical problems by dream exploration and discussion. For example, they quickly get a sense (probably no more) of style, for dreams are intensely personal. They learn quickly to deal with voice and persona because dreams push the complexity of the presenter at the recepients. They quickly sense the power of metaphor and metonomy, the capacity of sequencing, the productivity of symbol; and the complexities of audience. In short, they are drawn into the web of creative language and rhetoric, which can be and is applied to other kinds of writing than just creative. This last "application" does take some patience--as much for the students as anyone, for it is not direct and seems to be at odds with the directions of a "dream seminar." But the written interactions of the students can easily be pushed toward non-creative writing issues by a sensitive teacher.

The third dimension to a dream seminar is also

particularly a writing issue, for the dream seminar yokes together like no other technique the rhetorical polarity of public versus private--in realities, in styles, in manners, in images, in symbols, in narratives, etc. Dreams by their very nature are private, and yet they are discussed and responded to publicly. Writing--at least by it cultural function--has been regarded as private, but reading and discussion of it makes is intensely public (for the writer at least, the readers have a different sent of blinders which also can be explored). The ole "I know what I want to write, but I just can't do it" is shown here to be the hollow cliche it is, for quickly the issue which must be faced--like it is everytime we write--is what parts of my self am I willing to (or do I need to) share with this audience. The dream seminar quickly goes to war with the solipistic defense ploy of young (or blocked) writers, for it shows them that their "private" made "public" is what writing is all about--the concatenation of all sorts of "private views" from all sorts of people for all sorts of reasons. The false dichotomies of public voice vs private voice, or private honesty vs public hypocrisy, or public reality vs private reality, or private language vs public language are--if not laid to rest--put in their proper perspective: one is the building block of the other. The

nature of symbolic interaction is that it uses a number of polarities--langue and parole, form and content, structure and style, voice and audience, meaning and expression, etc--to weave the tensions of significance, power, and aesthetics. One quickly finds out that there is no hiding place from the responsibilities of being either a writer or a reader. And this brings me to my final dimension.

The fourth, and I think most important, dimension of the dream seminar in a writing class is that it provides two important psychological functions for the inexperienced writer. It gives both validation and authenticity. As I said earlier, it gives validation of personal subjectivity and authentication to cultural objectivity. Let me explain what I mean by those two terms, for I choose them to reflect the pattern of public vs private tension I just mentioned. Part of the power of the dream seminar is the confrontation between the public and private dimensions of creativity, dreaming, and writing. The seminar demonstrates again and again the public validity of private experience, the public commonality of private expression, the public reception of private creation, etc. The student sees again and again the commonality of his/her experience with that of others in creativity, dreaming, and writing. But at the same time, there is no need to get lost in some herd

mythos, for the dreams in particular and their effect upon writing in general authenticates the individual experience and expression because it allows the students to see the cultural commonality to their individual expressions. The direction of the dreams, the direction of the class, the direction of the discussion, the direction of the responses all are uniquely from that class and those students, but there will be sufficient individual differences--if not cultural differences to let them sense a useable balance between the public and the private. They know it, you know it, and much real interaction is built on the rhetorical assumption that there is a common base the individual can utilize without surrendering his or her uniqueness. Such yoking of personal validation with a sense of individual authenticity and public authenticity through private validation does much for the confidence of the students. Writing becomes their own writing, and they will defend it, nuture it, suffer through it, and agonize over it because they want it to present them as good as they can appear. They find their voices and they will not be silenced.

Now, I would be dishonest if I pretended that all of this works perfectly. There are a number of problems which have to be faced in such a class--some of them seem monumental. For example, avoidence behaviour will be

rampant at first; after all, dreams are very personal and the class is scary at first. A number of students will drop--if properly informed--because such discussion is just too intense. But the class will come to terms with this if gently reminded. The root cause of this avoidence is the anxiety one feels about dreaming on demand, and one has to be tolerant of resistences while pushing students to go on with their dreams. Remember you can't order the to dream on demand or record on demand, it has to be learned gradually and worked with purpose, expectation, and trust. Also, there is a bit of a tendency--until the validation and authentication phases take over--to consider such a class as "too weird" or "too silly" to be taken seriously. It has the look of some sort of academic cotton candy that will in the long run leave one intellectually thirsty. How serious a problem this will be depends on how much your students are driven by external standards of learning, but it is a passing tendency for most students. They quickly see the practicality of the skills they learn and sense the personal value of what they are discovering. Also, the class takes a extraordinary amount of time and attention. If it is to be effective the teacher must be involved in the process as much as the students, when means confronting a number of one's own cliches about writing and the

teaching thereof. But mostly it means tremendous amounts of reading and writing, for you have to follow the dream process yourself. Also, such a labor intensive class suggests this is more a class for "honors" sections than "regular" students or even "remedial" students, but even though I have yet to try the class with such students, I am not convinced it needs to be limited to "honors students;" after all everyone dreams and is creative in that particular sense. One simply needs to try to tap the creative source. But it also true that this class will create scheduling problems, for its structure and timing do not fit neatly into the 3 hour a week mode. So you have to struggle with scheduling problems--for the class and with the students. Finally, the greatest problem with the seminar--for the teacher at least--is how to balance the self-growth aspects of the class with academic evaluations; there is little cut-and-dried content here, and the format means giving a great deal of respect to individual styles. So I suspect is means higher grading, but my own feeling is that such higher grades reflect a better product and a better producer.

You have to decide if such limitations are too much of a libility for you or not. But whatever you decide, a dream seminar is a demanding course for both students and

teacher. It demands not only huge amounts of time, paper, and writing, it also demands a keen sense of responsbility as a reader--the topic of this panel, for one must be accepting without being a pushover; one must be honest without being cynical; one must be open without being transparent; one must be a critic without being critical; one must be sensitive without being mushy; one must be tolerant yet confrontive, suggestive yet unintrusive, listening without rehearsing, sharing and still accepting, giving and still taking, ad infintum. One is obligated to be authentic, and that is no easy task--even for a teacher. As I tell the students, being in such a class is mostly participating in the fullest spectrum of humanness. Cheap-shot roles and cookie-cutter responses just won't do. The goal here is consubstantiality--to use Ross Winterowd's term; what we are after is the validation and authenticity of a rhetorical community, a creative community, and a human community. Sometimes not knowing or not having a ready response is the best thing, for after all the dreamers's dreams are their own--for good or ill, and part of what we are about is teaching others that their writing is their own--maybe for ill, but hopefully for good.